

PREGNANT WOMEN SEEK HELP FROM PRO-LIFE GROUPS

by Sharon Brooks Hodge



On a winter morning in 1995, a freshman at the University of Houston had more on her mind than final exams. She was pondering one of the most difficult choices anyone will ever have to make. And it was, without exaggeration, a life or death decision: what should she do about the unplanned pregnancy complicating the last carefree days of youth?

Every year for the last decade, about 1.3 million women arrived at the same solution for resolving their precarious situations as this coed in Texas. They chose to terminate their pregnancies by having an abortion. According to the Centers for Disease Control, roughly 35 percent of all legal abortions in this country are performed on African-American women.

And that concerns people like Juluette Bartlett Pack. She wonders what has happened to the black community's respect for life and desire to live in a manner that pleases God. To Pack, herself a wife and mother, the growing number of black women getting pregnant out of wedlock and then preventing the fetus from becoming a baby is not just a statistic about abortion. The numbers also make a loud statement about Christianity, says Pack, adding that the message is disturbing.

"Abortion advocates want to paint a picture of people interfering with a woman's right to choose," says Pack. Then she asks, "Do women really have a choice when abortion is the only option?" That's not a rhetorical question. Consider the traumatic pregnancy of the student in Texas. She still lived at home with her parents, who insisted that she terminate the pregnancy. If she did not, she would be put out of the house, left to provide for herself. The baby's father, too, urged her to have an abortion. Although that was not the choice she wanted to make, the young woman could not see how she could take care of a child on her own. So she picked up the phone and called to make arrangements for an abortion.

As luck would have it, or call it divine intervention, her first call was to Houston's Family Assistance Center. Instead of

talking to someone about ending life, the teen in trouble spoke with Juluette Pack, who offered her a life affirming alternative. Pack's nonprofit center found a home for the woman to live in until her baby was born. Caring Christians at the Family Assistance Center helped provide all the tangible necessities, referred the mother-to-be to an adoption agency, which found a loving, permanent home for the infant.

Family Assistance Center's work did not end with meeting the physical needs. Pack's group also tended to the teen's broken spirituality.

"She was grateful to get the encouragement to make the decision for life," recalls Pack. Now, many months later, the woman who was once in trouble is preparing to counsel others who face the same tough decision.

The Family Assistance Center grew out of a vision Pack had for the preservation of families. With the backing of the Christian organization Texas Black Americans for Life, and financial assistance from two predominantly white churches, Pack purchased and renovated a duplex in one of Houston's black neighborhoods.

There, both men and women are compassionately advised about the consequences of promiscuous sexual behavior, says Pack.

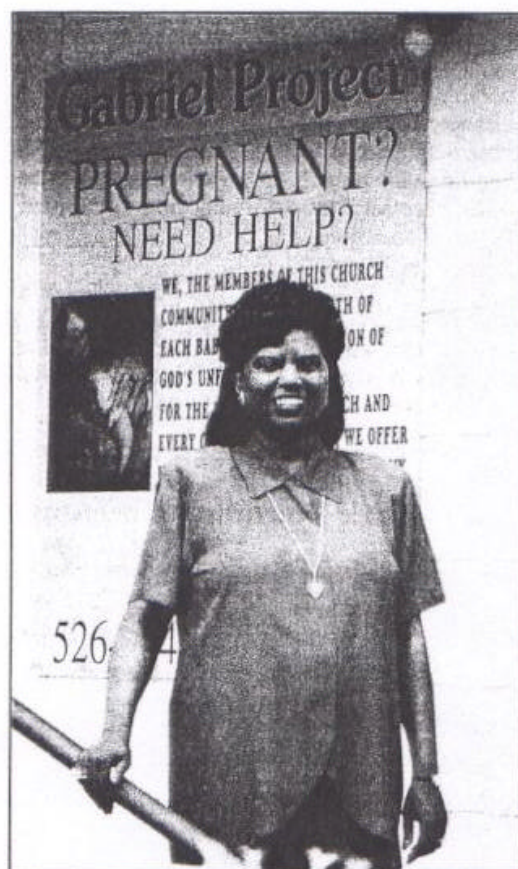
"I have a burden on my heart to raise the issue and share what God has to say because apparently His position is not being taught in a lot of black churches," Pack says. A large percentage of her clientele are also members of prominently black congregations. One of those churches even includes a \$20,000 gift to Planned Parenthood in its annual budget.

But Pack is skeptical of that organization's motives. She's not alone. Like Pack in Houston, Dean Gavaris, who runs a similar organization on the outskirts of Newark, N.J., also believes there are ulterior motives behind the easy access Planned Parenthood provides to abortion. Both Gavaris and Pack point to the white supremacist views of Margaret Sanger, who founded

the organization. In 1939, the Federation of Planned Parenthood contrived its "Negro Project" with the intention of reducing minority and poor white populations through population control programs.

In its brochure for women facing crisis pregnancies, the Family Assistance Center warns those considering abortion that Sanger and Planned Parenthood have a goal "to seduce our community into their ideas of 'family planning' by buying influence with our ministers, doctors, other medical professionals and media outlets. Most of Planned Parenthood's clinics are in high minority population areas."

Although Dean Gavaris is not black, about 96 percent of the women who come to the Gateway Pregnancy Center in



Juluette Bartlett Pack at the Houston-based Family Assistance Center

Irvington, N.J. are. In the building where his organization is housed, five abortionists also practice.

"I'm here for the kids being forced into decisions they don't want to make," says Gavaris, who, as a student at Bible College, was inspired by a passage in Exodus to "get involved in something meaningful."

Those who established Gateway Pregnancy Center, he explains, "wanted to be the Christian alternative to abortion. More often than not, people want to keep their children. But there's this myth that African Americans want to abort their children."

"The problem is that a lot of structures are in place and they misguide children," Gavaris says. The vast majority of counseling at Gateway is given to young women under the age of 24.

Like Pack, Gavaris believes there are people who share Sanger's view that certain youths are going to be promiscuous anyway, especially African-American youth. Readily available abortions are thus portrayed as a civil right, he adds.

"That is not only derogatory, it's humiliating and it's racist. It's so juvenile, and yet, they're allowed to get away with it."

Across the country, people of color are feeling compelled to debunk the prevailing perception that it's OK for unmarried youth to have sex as long as they protect themselves. But, unlike the media image of angry pro-lifers, Christians like Dean Gavaris and Juliette Pack are encouraging abstinence. As Gavaris says, they are talking about it in the context of "God's love, with compassion and without a protesting attitude." Young people, he says, must decide for themselves without being pushed into the political debate.

Pregnancy care centers reaching out to youth in black neighborhoods put a different face on the public's image of pro-lifers, says Lynn Signor, who has been the director of Grace Elliot Medical in Compton, CA for about a year.

"Pregnancy is a symptom; It's not the root issue," says Signor. "What we have to do is get to the root of the problem. Through faith-based counseling, and networking with other community resources, Grace Elliot Medical helps women work out some life plans.

"A lot of women do not have a vision, a sense of purpose. We help them find it in Jesus Christ," Signor says. She believes there ought to be some place in the community where sexually active teens are told to think about sex in the way God intended it to be. It is a central element of a covenant relationship.

"Just as there are rules that govern a game of basketball," Signor says in language a 14-year-old guy could comprehend, "there are specific boundaries for sex."

Someone must take the responsibility of telling teenagers exactly where the boundary lines fall, Lynn Signor and other people of faith contend.

Johnny Hunter, director of the Virginia-based Life Education and Resource Network, a coalition of black pro-life organizations says, "It is the responsibility of every Christian to warn men, women and children of the horrible consequences of wrong choices, especially abortion."

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